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ART. XVI.—*On the Ante-Brahmanical Worship of the Hindús.*

By JOHN STEPHENSON, D.D.

*(Continued from p. 196.)*

A SINGULAR coincidence exists between the history of the Greek word *δαίμων*, and the Sanskrit भूत (bhúta). The Greek word is applied by Homer and early Grecian writers, as is well known, to the highest intelligencies, and means one possessed of superior knowledge. The Sanskrit Bhúta is derived from the verb which signifies existence, and is applied to the elements of nature, and even to the great God Siva himself. But as *δαίμων*, with a change of religion, lost the sense of a deity, and came to be fused down to mean a demon or evil spirit, so now, in the Indian languages derived from the Saṅskrit, Bhúta is entirely confined, in common speech, to a wandering ghost or malicious spirit<sup>1</sup>. Again, as the term *δαίμων* was, among the Christian Greeks, frequently applied, in a bad sense, to the gods their fathers worshipped; so among the Brahmanized Hindús, the term Bhúta is applied contemptuously to the Ante-Brahmanical objects of worship. In all my intercourse, however, with those classes who worship these Bhútas, I never found them spontaneously apply this term to the objects of their adoration. They style them देव (deva) and ग्रामदेव (grámadeva), gods and village gods, but never भूत (bhúta), devils. Yet again, they do not deny that the term Bhúta is applicable to these gods; but they make the acknowledgment in the spirit of those English South-American travellers, who, when robbed and stripped at a distance from their lodgings, and their horses taken from them, and most glad to employ the services of a despised animal to carry them home, would confess that they rode a donkey.

I consider, then, the pertinacity with which the common people cling to this demon-worship, notwithstanding all the ridicule cast on it by the Brahmans, and their constantly terming them gods, whilst the Brahmans as constantly call them devils, a strong proof that this worship was established before the arrival of the Brahmans in the country, though perhaps in some things it may have been a little modified by their influence and that of their Hindú disciples.

<sup>1</sup> The Bhútas are supposed to animate the bodies of dead men, and thus rove about the world. Such is the Hindú theory of ghosts.

I observe, also, in Turnour's documents relative to the religion of Ceylon, that the whole of that island, previous to the arrival of Buddha, was overrun with devil and serpent-worship; and I think analogy may lead us to conclude that the same was the case in India before the arrival of the Brahmans. I hope no one will so far mistake my meaning as to suppose that I am defending the character of the Bhútas. But to say the truth, I do not think it would be difficult to point out among the Brahmanical gods, characters as diabolical as any of these demons. In the proper English sense of the word, no such being as a devil is known among the Hindús. The idea of an angelic being fallen from its pristine holiness and glory, and now possessed of malicious qualities, is a Jewish and Christian idea, and in this sense no Hindús worship devils. What Hindús, both the followers of the Brahmanical system and all the others, do worship, is superhuman powers. Some of these beings are endued with good, and some with bad qualities; and the Hindús suppose they are to be worshipped according to their natures. When they worship a malicious being, they do it in the spirit that an honest citizen pays black-mail to a robber, and not because they respect and love his character. Such is the true nature of the Hindú worship of devils. At the same time I lament the error and depravity which lead men astray from the great and glorious Being, who created and sustains the universe, to follow after such unworthy fictions.!

Vetál, then, now called by others a Bhúta, and by his worshippers a Deva, is the chief among that class of beings. The nature of the emblems by which he is worshipped, and their probable representation of the element of fire, I have already endeavoured to explain. I stated also, as a conjecture merely, that the circles might represent the course of the sun through the ecliptic; or it may be, that they were intended to mark his diurnal course in the heavens, or firmament, as it appears at night, lighted up by the starry luminaries.

There is a festival in honour of Fire or Light, which appears to me to be Ante-Brahmanical; it is the well-known feast of the Dípálí or Díválí. It is celebrated on the two last days of Asvini and the two first of Kártika.

On the first day of the festival, all, even widows and sanyásis<sup>1</sup>, are required to anoint themselves with oil, and to burn a number of lamps, so as to make a general illumination, on pain of being cast

<sup>1</sup> These persons, as all conversant in Hindú customs know, are forbidden at other times to anoint their bodies.

into hell. This, it is said, was granted by Siva as a boon to Narakásura, whom he slew on that day. On the second day, the last of Asvini, or the day of the new moon of Asvini, is the worship of Lakshmí. On it shopkeepers and bankers take out all their account-books, put on each a rupee, and then perform their puja, by putting on them paste of sandal-wood and flowers, and then making obeisance to them. This they do to ensure prosperity during the year which is now about to commence.

On the first of Kártika, called the Bali Pratipada, there is a festival in honour of Bali, and in commemoration of his dethronement by Vámana. On that day alone is it reputable among the Hindús to play at games of chance; on it, it is so, because of Vishnu's having reputably cheated Bali out of his kingdom on that day. Bullocks have their horns adorned with red-lead, and horses are decked out in their gayest trappings.

At the same time that Vishnu banished Bali to Pátála, he conferred on him, as a vara or boon, that on this day his worship should be performed. Accordingly before every door, or in the court-yard, a piece of ground is smeared with cow-dung, and within it the image of Bali, and the images of the members of his family, all made of cow-dung, are set up. Sometimes, instead of small images in the form of men, they are content with mere rolls of cow-dung, and these they worship with flowers, and paste of sandal-wood.

The last day of the Diváli is called Yama Dvítíya. On this day, Yama, the Indian king of the infernal regions, came to visit his sister Yamuná<sup>1</sup>, when she obtained, as a boon, that the brothers who on this day should go to their sisters' houses, and give and receive presents, should not be cast into hell. Accordingly sisters are visited on this day by their brothers, and if a man have no sisters, he dines at the house of his nearest female relation, whom he treats as a sister.

From all the circumstances, I conceive that the principal parts of this festival existed previous to the Brahmans' ascendancy in India.

It is celebrated near the autumnal equinox, which, among the Hebrews, Egyptians, and other ancient nations, was the beginning of the year, and it is still the beginning of the commercial year among the Hindús. The shopkeepers and bankers begin all their books of account from the Bali Pratipada.

<sup>1</sup> Yamuná is the personified Jumna river. Its waters are described in the *Sama Veda* as dark and turbid, and hence perhaps the relationship with Yama.

The first and third days are expressly said in the Kártika Máhátmya to have been established as boons given to an Asur and a Daitya, slain by the Brahmans' gods, which I think may, without much stress, be considered as meaning, that when Vámana had defrauded Bali of his kingdom, he found this festival so firmly established among the Hindús as to make it safer to adopt it, and represent it as a boon granted to Bali, than to attempt to abolish it.

Whether the images of Bali be an innovation or not, he does not seem to be much honoured by this worship. This much is certain, that the Brahmans never make an image of cow-dung to any being they respect; nor is it to be supposed they would have paid Bali even this shadow of an honour, had it not been as a kind of concession made to the subjects of a virtuous prince, of whose generous disposition they had taken advantage to work his ruin.

Connected with the Díválí is another festival, held fifteen days later, *i. e.* at the full moon of Kártika. It was instituted, it is said, in honour of Siva's having slain the Asur named Tripura, who had three cities, one of gold, another of silver, and another of iron. On that day the Hindús light up the Dípamálá, an obelisk made of stone, which stands before the doors of Siva's and Parvati's temples. This Dípamálá has places all round it made to contain oil, and to allow a wick to burn in them. At the top there is a large concavity, which is filled with oil on the day of the festival, and in which is then inserted a large roll of rags. When all these wicks are lighted a grand illumination is produced. I have no doubt, both from the appearance of these illuminated pillars, and the analogy with the above-mentioned festival, that the intention was to represent the heavenly luminaries, especially as they appear at night. But whether it was originally an adjunct to the Díválí, or a different form of it, prevailing in a district where the month began at the full moon, instead of the new moon, (a schism still subsisting among the Hindús,) I do not know any grounds for determining.

Fire, therefore, especially as manifested in the sun and heavenly bodies, seems to have been either the chief deity, or one of the principal objects of worship among the Hindús, before the arrival of the Brahmans among them. This deity was represented by pyramidal stones, painted red below and white above, to which bloody offerings were made. To this deity the beginning of their year was kept sacred, and the festival celebrated with illuminations.